

# Can Cincinnati's hillside views get a second chance?

## Conservation trust hopes to gain support from city

BY LUCY MAY

lmay@bizjournals.com

A stalled proposal to preserve Cincinnati's iconic hillside views could be revived this year thanks to an unlikely alliance between a preservation group and developer.

The Hillside Trust has been working with Mount Adams-based Metropolitan Design and Development to ensure the company's plans for new homes in Mount Adams won't block public views from the tony, hilltop neighborhood.

Matthew Fenik, a principal with Metropolitan, sought the trust's support even after the preservation group's effort to pass an ordinance to regulate such projects stalled last year in Cincinnati City Council. As it turned out, Metropolitan's plans didn't interfere with any public views, said Eric Russo, executive director of the Hillside Trust.

"We were a little leery of another layer of legislation," Fenik said. "What we found was what we had hoped for. He did support the project, and the city has agreed to the project. It was an education in this particular case."

Russo said he hopes the case will help convince skeptics that the proposed ordinance isn't aimed at halting development. Rather, it's aimed at limiting development heights and slopes to preserve the views that help make Cincinnati what it is – and help make hilltop property so valuable. Metropolitan plans to build two, detached single-family homes on Monastery Street in Mount Adams priced



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**"We're very pro-development," said Eric Russo, left, executive director of the Hillside Trust. Russo worked with developer Matthew Fenik on a tricky, upscale Mount Adams residential project.**

at around \$800,000 and as many as 13 single-family detached homes on Baum Street with the first one listed at \$995,000.

### ORDINANCE WOULD CLARIFY RULES

"We want to try to find a win-win for development and the public good," Russo said. "We're very pro-development. We just want to make sure we keep those views intact."

Still, Metropolitan's experience doesn't necessarily mean the approval process will go as smoothly for other projects, said Fenik, whose partners are Brian Folke and Brad Franz.

Dean Lutton, director of sustainability at Reztark Design Studio downtown, said the

trust initially opposed his purchase of city land in Mount Auburn where he and his wife want to build their dream home. To win approval, Lutton superimposed a maximum height for his project on a photo of the site to show his home would not infringe on the view. He hasn't yet started the project.

"We came up with a height restriction that wouldn't limit my development but still would preserve the views," he said.

Ultimately, Lutton said, it was up to him to show that his development would meet the proposed guidelines.

"It was time-consuming," he said.

Lutton said he thinks it would be easier for

developers to know the rules up front, which is what the proposed ordinance would establish. But he also worries the proposal could end up being too restrictive. The guidelines proposed last year would cover 50 different overlooks in the city.

### 'WE'RE DESPERATE TO INCENTIVIZE'

Cincinnati City Councilman Chris Bortz, chairman of council's Strategic Growth Committee, said that's too broad.

Bortz, who opposed the measure, said any such guidelines should be predictable for property owners, minimally restrictive, reasonable and limited to just a few view corridors.

"We're desperate to incentivize people to build," he said. "If we don't address the population decline in the city, no one's going to be enjoying those views because nobody will be here to enjoy them."

Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls, who chairs the Livable Communities Committee and supported the ordinance last year, said Russo would be wise to recruit developer advocates who can help convince a council majority to pass the measure. Four members of her committee supported the ordinance last year, but the proposal couldn't secure the fifth vote needed for passage by the full council.

"These views are a great natural asset and part of our competitive advantage as an urban center," she said.

Russo said he hopes the experiences that Metropolitan and Lutton have had will convince council. And he thinks everyone will agree that a clearer code would be better.

"A lot of times it comes down to who can hire the attorney to have (the code) interpreted their way," he said. "We want to have a set target – not a moving target."